

The Particular Psychology of Destroying a Planet

By Bill McKibben · The New Yorker · 10 min

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xonMobil, the owner of this Louisiana oil refinery, has adopted a tobacco-industry strategy to protect its business mod

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Two weeks ago, I looked at **the question of the anxiety** that the climate crisis is causing our psyches. But, if you think about it, there's an equally interesting question regarding the human mind: How is it that some people, or corporations, can knowingly perpetuate the damage? Or, as people routinely ask me, "Don't they have grandchildren?"

A reminder that plenty of people have been engaged in this kind of planetary sabotage came last week in a remarkable **paper** by Harvard's Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes. After analyzing nearly two hundred sources, including some internal company documents and "advertorials," they concluded that Exxon officials had embraced a strategy "that downplays the reality and seriousness of climate change, normalizes fossil fuel lock-in, and individualizes responsibility." And the authors found a model: "These patterns mimic the tobacco industry's documented strategy of shifting responsibility away from corporations—which knowingly sold a deadly product while denying its harms—and onto consumers. This historical parallel foreshadows the fossil fuel industry's use of demand-as-blame arguments to oppose litigation, regulation, and activism." As Supran explains in a long Twitter **thread** about the research, "ExxonMobil tapped into America's uniquely individualist culture and brought it to bear on climate change."

What kind of thinking goes into adopting a tobacco-industry strategy to protect a business model as you wreck the climate

system? (And it's not just Exxon—here's an **analysis** of how Big Meat is playing the same climate tricks.) No one, of course, can peer inside the heads of oil-company executives or those of their enablers in the legal, financial, and political worlds. But there's an interesting explanation in a new book from the British psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe. "**Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis**" states its argument in its subtitle: "Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare." Weintrobe writes that people's psyches are divided into caring and uncaring parts, and the conflict between them "is at the heart of great literature down the ages, and all major religions." The uncaring part wants to put ourselves first; it's the narcissistic corners of the brain that persuade each of us that we are uniquely important and deserving, and make us want to exempt ourselves from the rules that society or morality set so that we can have what we want. "Most people's caring self is strong enough to hold their inner exception in check," she notes, but, troublingly, "ours is the Golden Age of Exceptionalism." Neoliberalism—especially the ideas of people such as Ayn Rand, enshrined in public policy by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher—"crossed a Rubicon in the 1980s" and neoliberals "have been steadily consolidating their power ever since." Weintrobe calls leaders who exempt themselves in these ways "exceptions" and says that, as they "drove globalization forwards in the 1980s," they were captivated by an ideology that whispered, "Cut regulation, cut ties to reality and cut concern." **Donald Trump** was the logical end of this way of thinking, a man so self-centered that he

interpreted all problems, even **a global pandemic**, as attempts to undo him. “The self-assured neoliberal imagination has increasingly revealed itself to be not equipped to deal with problems it causes,” she writes.

In her conclusion, Weintrobe contrasts this narcissistic entitlement with the “lively” (and psychologically appropriate) entitlement of young people who are now demanding climate action so that they will have a planet on which to live full lives. “They, who will have to live in a damaged world, need our support to stop further damage,” she writes. “The danger is that unless we break with Exceptionalism and mourn our exaggerated sense of narcissistic entitlement, we may pay them lip service with kind words but throw them overboard . . . while we carry on with carbon-intensive life as usual.”

Passing the Mic

The film “The Ants and the Grasshopper” has been a long time in the making. In 2012, Raj Patel, a research professor at the University of Texas, went to Malawi with a film crew to follow the farmer and activist Anita Chitaya and document her work in ending hunger and gender inequality. “We wanted to show that the biggest innovations in the food system were being driven by frontline communities and people of color in the global South,” Patel said. But, “when Anita learned about climate change, and the role of the United States in

furthering it, she was shocked. She asked whether she should come over to America, to school us on what climate change was doing to her community. We fund-raised, travelled in 2017, and documented the impact she had on communities from Iowa to Detroit to Oakland to Washington, D.C.”

The film about that trip—charming, infuriating, big-hearted—will début later this month at the Mountainfilm documentary festival, in Telluride, Colorado. You can watch the trailer **here**, and it’s worth doing to get a sense of Chitaya’s voice so that you can imagine her answering these questions, which Patel and his team forwarded to her in Africa. (They translated the answers from her native Tumbuka, and the interview has been edited.)

What message were you most trying to get across to Americans when you travelled here?

The atmosphere has been damaged because of gas and smoke coming from America. We came to spread the news about how climate change affects us in Malawi, and what we are doing to change how we live to address the problems. We needed to tell them about the struggles that we were facing because it seems they did not know and, if they did not know about us, how could they care about us? I also want to say that it was an honor for us to meet them.

What do you think they heard, and what do you think they

didn't hear?

A lot of people listened and nodded when we talked about climate change in Malawi, but many also didn't understand. They agreed that the weather was different, but disagreed that it was something that was the result of humans. They said it was impossible for humans to do this to the weather, or said that it was God's will. This means that, even if their hearts were touched when we told them of our suffering, they did not understand that the way they live is causing that suffering.

If those Midwest farmers came to your community and your farm, what would you like them to learn from the experience?

I would be very happy if they came to my farm. I would teach them how we return the stalks and residue to the soils, how we plant soybeans and add manure from animals to heal the soil. If we take care of the soil, it will yield, and our lives can be healthy, without malnutrition.

But I would also show them how far we have to walk for water. In America, you have so much water. Here, our boreholes are drying up for longer each year. For us, it can be that it takes an hour to walk for water, and then you have to wait in a queue. I would show them how

climate change makes life harder for women. If men don't understand gender equality here, it makes life harder for their wives and daughters, who have to walk farther to find water.

And I would show them how men and women share work here. We have Recipe Days, when men and boys learn to cook, and everyone learns to experiment with new kinds of food. It helps us to bring about gender equality. We did not see as much of that in America as we do in our villages. Some people in America have a very traditional view of what men and women should do. If we are to work together, America needs to let go of its backward thinking.

Climate School

The biggest news of the week was Tuesday's report from the International Energy Administration (I.E.A.) explaining that, to have any chance of meeting the temperature target set in the Paris accord, new development of coal, gas, and oil has to cease now. This epochal statement will be reverberating for weeks. (I wrote about it **here**.) For now, this **interview** with the I.E.A. executive director, Fatih Birol, gets the message across concisely. Putting new money into fossil fuel, Birol said, would be “junk investments.”

The fight over the Line 3 pipeline—which activists conducted as best they could during a long pandemic winter in Minnesota—is slowly

nationalizing. The Seattle City Council **voted** to oppose the pipeline plan, becoming the first non-tribal government to do so. Meanwhile, activists announced plans for what looks to be a large **gathering** bent on nonviolent direct action along the pipeline route in June. Success would probably require making Line 3 enough of a national issue that the **Biden Administration** feels the need to intervene.

Meanwhile, Governor Gretchen Whitmer, of Michigan, offers an impassioned **defense** of her efforts to shut down the Line 5 oil pipeline through the Great Lakes.

Department of I Didn't See That Coming: A new **report** shows that rising carbon-dioxide emissions are lowering the density of the upper atmosphere and, in the process, could reduce the amount of space junk normally incinerated as it begins to return toward Earth. In a worst-case scenario, the amount of satellite-killing debris in orbit could increase fifty times by 2100—a “more probable outcome” is a tenfold or twentyfold increase.

The *Guardian's* environment editor Damian Carrington offers a handy **taxonomy** for figuring out what's greenwashing and what's real progress.

In Sunset Park, Brooklyn, community leaders, including Elizabeth Yeampierre, of *UPROSE*, were part of a push toward a new clean-energy model for the waterfront, through the development of an offshore wind project. Now, such a project will be built by the

Norwegian oil company Equinor. As Inside Climate News reports, the waterfront’s “73 acres of cracked concrete and rusting fences will be cleared away and replaced with the modern port that will anchor the burgeoning offshore wind industry. Crumbling bulkheads will be shored up to support 200-foot cranes. The decrepit piers, which look out over Lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, will be reinforced to hold turbine blades as long as football fields.”

Tasmania was one of the birthplaces of green politics, and Christine Milne, a former senator from the Australian Greens party, is hard at work restoring Lake Pedder, which was vastly expanded in the nineteen-seventies by flooding from a huge hydroelectricity project. As she makes clear in this **video**, the ancient glacial lake is a prime candidate for restoration to its original state, as the United Nations’ Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which will run through 2030, commences.

Together with the activist pranksters the Yes Men and the Fixers Fix, the young climate campaigners of Fridays for Future pulled a **prank** on the U.K.’s Standard Chartered Bank, though it’s sad that a declaration from a bank that it will stop funding fossil fuels is more likely to be a spoof than reality.

Brentwood, California—which is about fifty miles east of Berkeley—decided not to renew a franchise for a pipeline that runs through a corner of the city. Council members and residents, the Mercury

News **reported**, “had many questions concerning safety of the pipeline that flows 1.8 million cubic feet of natural gas daily through the city, including near several subdivisions, which were not built at the time the pipeline was constructed. ‘I’ll be honest, I have concerns,’ Councilwoman Jovita Mendoza said. ‘It’s right by school, and that makes me super uncomfortable.’ ”

Scoreboard

A new **study** finds that a third of global food production may be at risk by century’s end if greenhouse-gas emissions keep rising at a rapid rate. But, if we meet the targets set in the Paris accord, only five to eight per cent of our harvests may be in danger.

Pressure is building on the investment giant T.I.A.A. to divest from fossil fuels. The asset manager, which handles the pensions of many teachers and university professors, has more clients in the State University of New York system than any other university—and last week members of the University at Albany’s faculty senate **followed** the lead of their colleagues on other campuses and voted to ask T.I.A.A. to get out of fossil fuels.

A new **paper** from the Carbon Tracker initiative in London shows that, contrary to a downbeat **assessment** from the International Energy Agency, there’s enough easily available lithium and other

minerals to keep the renewables boom going—and that the switch from fossil fuels should dramatically decrease the total amount of mining activity on the planet. It appears to answer many of the concerns **raised** in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed on the same topic.

Amid the tragic fighting in the Middle East, the outgoing (Jewish) and incoming (Muslim) executive directors of the Arava Institute, perhaps the region's leading environmental-studies center, issued a **plea** for peace and for joint work on larger issues. “Instead of turning our attention to the common threats we face from a pandemic still out of control in Gaza and the West Bank, the economic fallout from the pandemic, and the looming impact of climate change, we find ourselves embroiled once again in violence and the historic political conflict. We call on the government of Israel to prevent further violent escalation and implore leaders in the region to reject a return to tribalism and find a path towards peace, reconciliation, security, justice and self-determination for all.”

Warming Up

Bettye LaVette's **version** of “Blackbird” is killer anytime, but, just to remind ourselves that people aren't the only ones with a stake in the climate outcome, here's an old **video** of the ecologist Curt Stager playing the same song—for a black bird. It will make you grin.



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